1: Herskovits E-4, 5 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3 Mirebalais

CHAPTER V

BIRTH, CHILDHOOD, AND ADOLESCENCE

842 The love of children, and the prestige which a man gains as head of a large family, are factors that go far to explain the desire for a numerous progeny. In this not only is he aided by his own sophistication in matters of sex — for in Haitian peasant culture, one encounters no such conventionalized naïveté as the ignorance of physiological paternity found in certain other, non-African societies — but his desire is furthered as well by the absence of contraceptives, and the emphasis laid by Church, State, and African tradition on the desirability of many offspring. Though situations do arise when, because of illicit relations between a man and woman that result in conception, an abortion is held necessary, usually as soon as a woman discovers that she has conceived, she proceeds to take the necessary protective measures. First she goes to the old women of her own family, who give her herbs for the "three baths" she must take on each of the three succeeding days. This accomplished, she next visits a priest or priestess of the *vodun* cult who has the confidence of her family or of her husband's, and procures other herbs also for the purpose of preparing baths, and, in addition, a magic charm to wear about her neck or about her waist. This charm protects both herself and the child in her womb against the evil eye or any

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other evil spirit or evil magic that may be directed against her. If she is a worshipper of the African deities of the *vodun* cult, she may also ask the *vodun* priest to determine by divination what spirit will protect the child, and what her own deity asks to insure his aid. During all her pregnancy she is particularly careful to avoid eating those foods which are "hateful" to her — that is, which cause her to become ill — though in Mirebalais, at least, it is not necessary that she refrain from partaking of the foods "hateful" to her husband. A pregnant woman has privileges and powers not shared with other women, as was evidenced when a Haitian man once appeared with his eye half shut, explaining that the sty was a punishment for his refusal to buy something his pregnant spouse had coveted. "They do not always know they are sending you a sty, but it is a power they have," he made clear.

Shortly before parturition is expected, both the pregnant woman and her husband invoke the aid of the family deities and make them offerings of a *convert sec*.* The rite is an informal one that need not necessarily take place in the familial house of worship; if it is more convenient, it may be performed inside their own house or in the courtyard. After repeating the Pater Noster and the Ave Maria, a prayer such as the following is pronounced by the woman:

"Toutes mystères, tant pour papa que manman, du même de côté mari moin: m'ap mandé ou pou' moin fait un heureux accouchement, pou' l'ouv'i chemin ba moin. — All the gods, both of my father and of my mother, as well as those of my husband: I ask that you cause me to have a good delivery, that you open the road for me."

At the same time the family ancestors are not overlooked:

"Moin mandé nou' tous pou' nou' vini délivré moin, pou' nou' l'ouvri chemin pou' moin, pou' pas quitté

* The various types of offerings will be discussed in the next section of this book.

3: Leyburn Z-4, 5 (no date) 1966
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789 generally through no wish of their own, have the uncanny ability to cause evil simply by a glance. One look is enough to do the damage. Although theory is a bit vague on this point, it appears that certain irritable spirits use the agency of the human eye to vent their spleen on mortals who are fortunate: good looks and strokes of luck act, consequently, as lodestones to the fateful glance. And where the [375] glance falls ill luck may spread, harming all within reach. In the days [304] of slavery people had such a fear of the evil eye that they did not hesitate to disfigure infants who at birth seemed to be particularly handsome and so likely to attract attention. Nowadays the practice 777 is to avert the glance by making an *arrêt*. This "halt" may be either a 789 special charm worn on the person or else the mark of a half-moon done with a caustic vegetable substance on the cheek. As with Europeans who believe in the evil eye, certain specialists ply a lucrative trade through their reputation for effective charms against the maldioque.

Other charms may be mentioned. There is the *garde* which protects its wearer against evil of any variety—the near relative of the good-luck charm worn by thousands of "civilized" people. There is the *ouanga*, or *wanga*, compounded to achieve a special end, generally an evil one. Faine remarks that ouanga is

[92] A Créole word of African origin [signifying] a philtre or simple of a special kind, compounded by an *houngan* out of such diverse ingredients as a dead chicken, some grains of indigo and maize, [illegible], pieces of money, asafoetida, etc., the whole contained in a half-calabash. . . . The Ouanga, placed in the home of an enemy, is designed to bring him bad luck even to the extent of giving him elephantiasis ("gros pied") when he has inadvertently stepped on the ouanga.[22]

The ouanga is the Haitian equivalent of the hoodoo, for through its influence one may (or so he believes) bring illness, misfortune, or death to an enemy. For every ouanga there is a garde, for every evil a cure. The art lies in finding out the nature of the ouanga causing harm, and then knowing exactly what to do to fend it off.

• 751 789 Historically the most interesting garde is that called a *dreyue*, which is thought to insulate one against wound by weapons or bullets. Reference has already been made to the utter abandon with which the Negroes, both at the time of the insurrection and later in

[22] Jules Faine, *Philologie Créole* (Port-au-Prince, 1937), p. 319.

3: Leyburn Z-4, 5 (no date) 1966
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the struggle for independence, threw themselves against the formidable weapons of the whites. Whenever in spite of the drogue a man was wounded, there was always the explanation of other potent magic, never a surrender of the belief in drogues. Tradition has it that Christophe wore a drogue giving him immunity against all but silver bullets, and that he kept a silver bullet for suicide in case the need should arise—as it did. Drogues were worn by the caco guerrillas, active from 1919 to 1922, who harassed the Marines during the Occupation of the country.

Such forms of magic are found among practically every known folk. There are traces of charms in the folklore of most "civilized" people, as well as in actual, if secret, use by many apparent sophisticates.

The next commonest application of magic has to do with disease. Haiti is a poor and prevailingly illiterate country in which there are not enough trained medical doctors to serve adequately even the small population of the towns. People who live in the secluded valleys and on the mountainsides receive practically no medical attention. The disease rate if accurate figures could be obtained would certainly be shockingly high, with hookworm and malaria all but universal, and yaws, elephantiasis, and tuberculosis common. In the case of disease and its treatment, it is fair to say that the Haitian peasant is typically primitive.

Sickness is thought to be caused either as a punishment or a warning by one of the loa, or by evil magic wrought by one's enemies. When a man falls ill, therefore, he sends for the specialist, whether houngan, bocor, or caplata, to discover the responsible loa; next, he must learn whether the loa is angry with him, and if so, for what reason; if it is found that the loa is acting through magical compulsion of an enemy, the treatment of the disease will be different from the case of a loa acting without human compulsion. An angry spirit can be appeased by proper sacrifices; a spirit acting as an agent of evil magic must be fought by another spirit, compelled by the countermagic of the patient's specialist. Sometimes the countermagic is simple exorcism by spells and incantations. At other times it is highly involved and dangerous, requiring exotic plants, continuous attention, even illegal practices such as mutilating a corpse. Casual observation might fail to detect the magical element in some of the operations, for they resemble merely the herbs or applications of old wives' tales.